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ABSTRACT

A 10-year educational experiment being conducted in England in which 18,000 elementary school students are taught French by non-specialist teachers is described. The methods used rely extensively on audiovisual materials. Discussion focuses on the following factors affecting the program: (1) sex of the student, (2) socioeconomic status, (3) employment expectations, (4) attitudes towards foreign peoples, (5) parental attitudes, (6) teacher's attitudes, (7) characteristics of the "good teacher," (8) maturational factors, (9) instructional materials, (10) mode of presentation, and (11) the learning situation. A list of references is included. The study is to be completed in 1974. (RL)

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Factors Affecting Student Acceptance or Rejection of a Foreign-language Learning Program

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Factors Affecting Student Acceptance or Rejection of a Foreign-language Learning Program

The present paper reports data arising from a longitudinal study of 18,000 elementary school students, taught French as a foreign language within the context of a national teaching experiment. The students taking part in the experiment are taught French from the age of eight by non-specialist class teachers using audio-visual instructional materials. A research program to evaluate the outcome of the experiment was begun in 1964 and is scheduled for completion in 1974. Students attending a representative sample of elementary schools were selected for inclusion in the experimental sample on the basis of age alone; the sample is therefore characterised by a broad range of socio-economic strata. Each student in the sample is studied for a period of five years: three years at the elementary and two years at the secondary level. Tests of proficiency in spoken and written French and measures of student, parent, and teacher attitudes have been developed and are administered at appropriate intervals during the program of instruction. A schedule of classroom observation and individual interviews with selected students, teachers, and parents has also been maintained throughout the experimental period. Earlier analyses of the data (Burstall, 1970, 1972) indicated a positive association between certain attitudinal variables and the successful acquisition of a foreign language. The present account focuses on further data relating to the interaction of variables leading to the development of attitudes of acceptance or rejection of the foreign-language learning program.

Prior to embarking on the program of instruction in French at the age of eight, the great majority of the students in the experimental sample express positive attitudes towards foreign-language learning. Three years later, however, at the end of the elementary stage of the program of instruction, approximately 50 per cent of the sample express hostile attitudes towards the program and seek to reject all further opportunities for foreign-language learning. The remaining 50 per cent

express satisfaction with their level of achievement in French and a positive desire to extend their experience of foreign-language learning. Two years later, during the secondary stage of the program, a somewhat higher proportion of the students (approximately 54 per cent of the experimental sample) express generally favourable attitudes towards learning French, but there are a number of specific issues on which students' responses indicate a negative shift of opinion. It is clearly of some importance to identify those factors in the learning situation which determine the development of divergent attitudes towards foreign-language acquisition. Up to the present time, analysis of the data suggests that factors affecting student acceptance or rejection of the foreign-language learning program include the following:

1. Sex of student Throughout the period of the experiment, the attitude of the girls towards the program of instruction is consistently more favourable than that of the boys: it includes a positive desire for contact with France and the French and generalises to the learning of other foreign languages. The results of chi-square tests indicate, for example, that significantly more girls than boys agree that they would like to be able to speak several languages, go to France and meet French people, and continue their study of French in future years. Significantly more girls than boys consider also that all children should learn French in the elementary school and that French will be useful to them in their future life. In addition, girls are more confident than boys of their parents' support. The boys' attitude towards the program is comparatively unfavourable. Significantly more boys than girls feel that learning French is a waste of time and that there are other, more important subjects on which they should be spending the time available to them. In general, boys do not believe that French will be useful to them when they leave school.

Evidence from other studies suggests that the more positive attitudes expressed by the girls represent, in the main, a response to social and cultural pressures. Robinson (1971) has

suggested that being 'good at language' may be seen as admirable for girls, but unmanly for boys. The view that foreign-language learning is a more suitable accomplishment for girls than for boys is undoubtedly still current in British society, reinforced by the fact that a knowledge of foreign languages has a direct and obvious application to the future employment possibilities open to girls, but is less clearly relevant to those available to boys.

2. Socio-economic status The findings of the present study indicate a tendency for the percentage of students with favourable attitudes towards the foreign-language learning program to increase with social status. This tendency is clearly illustrated by the significant differences in attitude between students attending different types of secondary school. Each type of secondary school differs in the socio-economic composition of its intake: at the one extreme, the grammar schools draw their students mainly from the higher socio-economic strata; at the other, the secondary modern schools draw their students mainly from the lower socio-economic strata. These differences in the social composition of the schools are paralleled by differences in student attitude: whatever the specific point at issue, favourable attitudes towards foreign-language learning are most characteristic of the grammar school students and unfavourable attitudes of the secondary modern school students. Jahoda (1953) has described the boys attending secondary modern schools as showing less evidence of upward social mobility than the girls and as having a deeper sense of working-class loyalty. It might therefore be expected, both from studies of the development of prejudice (Morse and Allport, 1952; Allport, 1954) and from evidence regarding the effect of social class on children's attitudes towards foreign peoples (Lambert and Klineberg, 1967) that the boys in the secondary modern schools would exhibit more hostile attitudes towards a foreign culture - in this instance, towards France and the French - than would any other group of students in the experimental sample. The data confirm this expectation.

There is also considerable evidence to suggest that parental encouragement varies with social class, parents in the higher socio-economic strata offering their children more support during their schooling than those in the lower socio-economic strata (Floud et al., 1956; Douglas, 1964; Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967; Barker-Lunn, 1970; Sumner and Warburton, 1972). Furthermore, teachers tend to adopt different standards to evaluate the potential abilities of children from different socio-economic strata, over-estimating the abilities of those from higher socio-economic strata and under-estimating the abilities of those from lower socio-economic strata, attributing, in addition, less favourable behavioural characteristics to the latter (Goodacre, 1968; Barker-Lunn, 1970). The depressant effect that a child's perception of low expectations on the part of 'significant others' in his life (in this context, parents and teachers) can have on his attitudes, aspirations and achievement has already been demonstrated in a number of studies (Brookover et al., 1964; Johannesson, 1967) and is further supported by the findings of the present study, where students from the lower socio-economic strata, the boys in particular, exhibit less favourable attitudes towards the program of instruction, a more negative self-image, and lower levels of aspiration than the rest of the sample.

3. Employment expectations The sex differences in attitude towards foreign-language learning, referred to earlier, undoubtedly stem partly from the different employment expectations of boys and girls and the extent to which foreign-language learning may be perceived as relevant to their occupational requirements. Adolescent students of both sexes have been reported to view the enhancement of vocational success as the primary function of education and, in consequence, to place a high value on school subjects, such as Mathematics and English, which have an obvious relevance to their future employment prospects. Girls and their parents also tend to accept the vocational value of foreign-language learning, whereas boys and their parents tend not to do so (Schools Council, 1968; Sumner and Warburton, 1972). There are some indications,

however, that changing attitudes towards greater involvement in European affairs cou'd reduce sex differences in attitudes towards foreign-language learning. The boys in the sample seem more aware than their parents of the changes in employment patterns that could result from Britain's recent entry into the European Economic Community and which might confer a considerable practical value on the possession of foreign-language skills. If knowledge of French could be shown to have a real 'pay-off value' in terms of vocational enhancement, it seems reasonable to suppose that boys might then adopt a more positive attitude towards learning the language.

4. Attitudes towards foreign peoples It has been argued that students will develop positive attitudes towards foreign peoples simply as a result of receiving foreign-language instruction. Riestra and Johnson (1964), for example, investigated the attitudes of fifth-graders towards Spanish-speaking peoples and found that the attitudes of the experimental group, who had studied Spanish, were significantly more positive than those of the control group, who had no knowledge of Spanish. The authors interpreted their findings as evidence that 'teaching a foreign language to elementary-school children ... is a potent force in creating more positive attitudes toward the peoples represented by that language'. The findings of the present study would suggest, however, that the mere process of foreign-language learning is not by itself sufficient to promote positive attitudes towards the foreign culture, although actual contact with the representatives of that culture may be an important factor in both the development of positive attitudes and the achievement of a high level of linguistic skill. It was found in the present study that students who had been to France during the course of the program of instruction differed significantly in both attitude and achievement from those who had not had this opportunity: those who had been to France expressed more positive attitudes towards France and the French, as well as towards learning French, than did those who had not been to France; the former also reached a significantly higher level of achievement in both spoken and written French than did the latter. Carroll (1967), in his survey of the foreign-language

attainments of college and university students majoring in modern languages, also found that students who had been abroad were superior in foreign-language skills to those who had not been abroad: the longer the period abroad, the more marked the differences in level of achievement.

With regard to the findings of the present study, a certain caution should be observed in their interpretation, since it was found that the students who had been to France during the course of the epxeriment were disproportionately representative of the higher-status socio-economic groups. It seems probable, therefore, that their enhanced level of achievement and more positive attitudes towards foreign-language learning derived at least in part from the effects of their more favoured socio-economic status.

5. Parental attitudes Evidence from other studies points to a positive association between the attitudes of parents and the attitudes and achievement of their children, both in the general sphere of school attainment (Floud et al., 1956; Fraser, 1959; Douglas et al., 1968) and in the more limited area of foreign-language learning (Feenstra and Gardner, 1968; Feenstra, 1969; Gardner and Santos, 1970; Gardner and Lambert, 1972). Where achievement in a particular subject-area, such as Mathematics or French, can be shown to vary systematically with the sex of the student, it seems highly probable that parents are transmitting to their children the accepted values of the wider society. Some support for this view may be found in Morris's (1966) evidence that differences in boys' and girls' reading skills are attributable to motivational and environmental factors rather than to differences in ability, and in Preston's (1962) finding, arising from a comparative study of reading comprehension in the United States and in Germany, that, although girls reach a higher level of achievement than boys in the United States, the reverse is true in Germany. Preston ascribes these results to the fact that 'reading and learning' are regarded as approved masculine activities in Germany, where the teaching force, even at the elementary level, is predominantly male, whereas, in the

United States, reading skills tend to be 'associated with femininity'. Pointing in the same direction are recent findings regarding the enhanced level of achievement in Mathematics of girls who attend co-educational rather than single-sex schools and who are not, therefore, exposed to traditionally negative feminine attitudes towards the acquisition of mathematical skills (Husen, 1967; Pidgeon, 1970).

In the present study, parental attitudes towards the foreign-language learning program have been found to differ significantly according to the sex of the student: girls receive more overt parental encouragement to reach a high level of achievement in French than boys and also benefit from consistently greater practical support in their language-learning activities. There is a clear link between the attitudes of parents towards the program of instruction and their evaluation of the relevance of foreign-language skills to their sons' and daughters' future employment prospects.

6. Teachers' attitudes Students' attitudes towards foreign-language learning tend to mirror their teacher's evaluation of their language-learning potential. Teachers' ratings of their students' linguistic aptitude were found to vary according to the student's sex, social class and previous level of academic achievement. Positive teacher attitudes were associated with high student achievement, an enhanced self-image and a favourable attitude towards foreign-language learning; negative teacher attitudes were associated with low student achievement, a depressed self-image and an unfavourable attitude towards foreign-language learning.

These findings are consistent with those of a number of recent studies which have highlighted the dominant role played by teachers' attitudes and expectations in structuring their students' learning experiences. Palardy (1969), for example, found that the mean reading test scores for boys in first-grade classes where the teachers expected boys to be less successful than girls in learning to read were significantly lower than those for comparable boys in classes where the teachers did not share this expectation. A recent large-scale study of

the education of disadvantaged children (US Office of Education, 1970) also reported 'an extraordinarily consistent relationship' between teachers' expectations and children's reading achievement gains. Brophy and Good (1970), in a study of teacher-pupil interaction in four first-grade classes found that teachers demanded better performance from those children for whom they had higher expectations and were also more likely to praise such performance when it occurred. In contrast, they were more likely to accept poor performance from children for whom they had low expectations and were less likely to praise the latter's good performance when it occurred, even though it occurred less frequently. Similarly, Rist (1970), carrying out a longitudinal study of a class of black children in an urban ghetto school, reported that children judged by the teacher (apparently on the basis of social class criteria) to be potential 'fast learners' received the majority of the available teaching time and the bulk of the teacher's supportive behaviour. Those judged to be potential 'slow learners', on the other hand, were taught infrequently and were subjected to considerable disapproval and rejection by the teacher. The gap between the two groups' completion of academic material widened as the school year progressed: the children's divergent performance on achievement tests at the end of the year was then used as supportive evidence for the teacher's initial judgement. In a similar vein, a recent study of classroom behaviour carried out by Aspy and Roebuck (1972) has produced evidence of an association between the extent of a teacher's 'positive regard for students' and the level of 'cognitive functioning' which the teacher was able to elicit from the students. The findings of the present study indicate a similar association between the teacher's positive or negative attitude towards his students and their own attitudes, levels of aspiration, and subsequent success or failure in foreign-language learning.

7. Characteristics of the 'good' teacher Student acceptance of the foreign-language program is affected by whether or not the language teacher is perceived as a 'good' teacher:

students' attitudes towards the program itself tend to echo their evaluation of the language teacher's characteristics. The characteristics of a 'good' teacher are, however, perceived differently by students at different levels of achievement: low-achieving students tend to place most value on personal qualities such as warmth and patience; high-achieving students tend, by contrast, to value most the teacher high in professional and managerial skills.

8. Maturational factors The findings of a recent cross-national study of children's attitudes towards foreign peoples suggest that favourable attitudes reach their peak at about the age of ten and thereafter decline during the early years of adolescence, concomitant with the accelerated development of the stereotyping process and an increase in loyalty towards the peer-group (Lambert and Klineberg, 1967). Other studies (Horne and Allport, 1952; Allport, 1954) have indicated that close identification with the values of the peer-group, at its height in adolescence, is a crucial factor in the formation of prejudice and the consequent rejection of values characteristic of foreign cultures. Further, evidence from studies of school achievement strengthens the view that the early adolescent period may be particularly critical for the development of negative attitudes towards the self as well as towards others. A number of studies (Douglas et al., 1968; Schools Council, 1968; Sumner and Warburton, 1972) have noted the increasing negativity of the attitudes of unsuccessful secondary school students, but Ferri's recent follow-up study of students involved in an investigation into the effects of 'streaming' procedures would suggest that even high-achieving students, and particularly girls, may show a deterioration in their attitudes to school work and a decrease in their levels of aspiration during early adolescence (Ferri, 1971).

In the present study, students' attitudes were monitored at the end of the elementary stage of the program and, again, after the completion of two years of the program's secondary stage. A somewhat higher proportion of the older students expressed

generally favourable attitudes towards learning French than did the younger, but there were a number of specific issues on which a negative shift of opinion was apparent during the early adolescent period. For example, the results of chi-square tests indicate that significantly more secondary school students than elementary school students agree that learning French is a waste of time, that they are unlikely ever to speak French once they have left school, that they have difficulty in understanding the tape-recorded material, that they are afraid to speak in French and feel that French is becoming increasingly difficult for them to learn. In the same vein, significantly more elementary school students than secondary school students agree that they would like to be able to speak several languages and that they would like to go to France and get to know some French people. Similarly, significantly more elementary than secondary school students feel that their parents are pleased that they are learning French and are themselves eager to continue their study of French.

The somewhat higher percentage of students claiming to enjoy learning French at the secondary stage than at the elementary stage is, in fact, due almost entirely to the high-achieving students in the sample, particulary the girls, who welcome the increasing emphasis on written work encountered in the secondary school. This concentration on written work is linked with a sharp increase in anxiety regarding the necessity to speak in French, the most anxious group in this respect being the high-achieving girls. For this latter group, fear of speaking in French seems invariably to stem from fear of being exposed to the ridicule of the peer-group: this is far more marked in co-educational than in single-sex schools. This finding may be compared with Ferri's report that, between the ages of ten and 12, the high-achieving students in her sample, and particularly the girls, developed a poorer self-image and gave greater evidence of anxiety with regard to school achievement than did any other group of students (Ferri, 1971).

9. <u>Instructional materials</u> Students' attitudes towards

foreign-language learning appear to be affected by certain features of the instructional materials. The majority of the students in the sample are strongly orientated towards realism in their studies. They complain that the instructional materials are often unrealistic in content and incapable of providing them with an adequate basis for communication with French-speaking people. Their commitment to the view that the main purpose of learning French is to achieve a means of communication with other speakers of the language leads them overwhelmingly to reject fiction and fantasy in favour of fact and realism.

10. Mode of presentation In their study of under-achievement in foreign-language learning, Pimsleur and his co-workers found a positive association between success in foreign-language learning and preference for the auditory modality. This led them to suggest that the principal component of linguistic ability might be the 'ability to receive and process information through the ear' (Pimsleur et al., 1963). Lambert (1963), however, pointed out that the audio-visual approach to language learning does not take into account individual differences in modality preference at different age-levels and might well, where older students are concerned, run counter to long-established patterns of achievement. Several other studies of foreign-language learning have lent support to Lambert's view by highlighting the fact that an uncongenial mode of presentation can create negative attitudes towards the acquisition of the language in question. Students may react negatively to the passive features of televised instruction (Moskowitz and Amidon, 1962; Moskowitz, 1964) or to the total reliance on the spoken word which the audio-visual approach entails (Mueller and Leutenegger, 1964). The findings of the present study suggest that only a minority of students can cope successfully with a purely auditory presentation of material. Few students appear to tolerate well the predominantly passive role which listening to tape-recorded material entails and more than 80 per cent of the sample, at both elementary and secondary levels, state a definite preference for visually-supported material. This preference is particularly

characteristic of the high-achieving students in the sample, especially the girls, a number of whom attempted to alleviate their dependence on the spoken word by inventing their own phonetic script.

In their early investigation of the use of radio as an educational medium, Cantril and Allport (1935) concluded that a face-to-face presentation of material was superior to a purely auditory presentation, if the material to be presented were of a complex verbal nature. These findings were subsequently confirmed by Krawiec (1946) and have received further support from language-learning studies in which increased efficiency and enhanced motivation are reported to have followed the addition of visual components to an otherwise purely auditory presentation (Dodson and Price, 1966; Mueller and Harris, 1966). Similarly, in the present study, the introduction of the written script after a period of purely oral learning was observed to have a highly motivating effect on students who had been experiencing difficulties in retaining material presented without visual support.

11. <u>The learning situation</u> Homogeneous ability-grouping has been advocated as a possible solution for the difficulties involved in whole-class foreign-language teaching, with its inevitable uniformity of pace and presentation (Pimsleur et al., 1963; Hernick and Kennedy, 1968). It is certainly the case in the present study that the majority of students reject whole-class teaching in favour of individual or small-group work. Both high-achieving and low-achieving students express a marked preference for homogeneous ability-grouping in foreign-language instruction, to allow for greater variation in pace and increased individualisation of teaching objectives.

It is hoped that the findings arising from this ongoing program of research, incomplete as they are, will nevertheless be seen as relevant both to the development of instructional materials and to the planning of teaching strategies in the foreign-language learning situation.

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